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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [MARR](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: COLOMBIA'S NEW CRIMINAL GROUPS: THE DRUG TRADE'S
NEW GENERATION

REF: A. BOGOTA 1033
[1](#)B. BOGOTA 1925
[1](#)C. BOGOTA 3448
[1](#)D. 06 BOGOTA 6262

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) New criminal groups active in areas of former paramilitary influence are largely small drug mafias that lack the United Self-Defense Forces' (AUC) political pretensions. Most emerged to exploit the narcotrafficking and criminal vacuum left by the AUC's demobilization; an estimated 20% of their members are former-paras using their old narcotics networks. To combat this threat, the GOC is boosting police presence in rural areas, creating interagency task forces targeting the groups, and hiking outreach to vulnerable sectors. The profits from illegal drugs will continue to fuel these groups, but the ex-paras' loss of political and social acceptance--and expanded state presence--should prevent them from recreating the AUC's former national network. End Summary.

Incipient, with Paramilitary Vestiges

[1](#)2. (SBU) Security forces, think tanks, human rights groups, and multilateral organizations are concerned by the rise of about 20 new criminal groups (ref A), with an estimated 3,000 members. The groups are much smaller than former AUC blocs, and lack a unified structure. They are active in areas where paramilitary blocs demobilized (the north coast, Antioquia / Choco, the southwest, and eastern plains). The groups include small numbers of former AUC members who did not demobilize, including key mid-level commanders, and exploit some former AUC drug processing and distribution networks. Police estimate that 20 percent of new groups' members are demobilized ex-paras. OAS observer mission coordinator Juan Carlos Garzon says the structures are hard to verify since they keep low profiles.

Apolitical Drug Mafias ("It's the Coca, Stupid")

[1](#)3. (SBU) A May 2007 report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) says, "The AUC had enjoyed a quasi-legitimate status in

some parts of the country.... The new groups have nothing like this and are seen as a mafia." Groups' leaders are clandestine, have dropped AUC political and counterinsurgency rhetoric, and lack the social and political acceptance enjoyed by the AUC in many regions. OAS/MAPP's Garzon said the groups are increasingly "less paramilitaries and more narcotraffickers." In many areas, new groups have forged coca trading alliances with the FARC and ELN, the sworn enemies of the ex-AUC (ref C). In others, groups fight with the FARC for control of coca cultivation and trafficking corridors.

14. (SBU) Security analyst Roman Ortiz (Universidad de los Andes) described direct linkages among three narcotrafficking groups spanning three decades of Colombia's cocaine trade. First, the Medellin and Cali cartels of the 1980's; second, the late 1990's AUC whose bosses were groomed in the cartels' protection rackets; and third, today's new criminal groups, many of whose leaders learned their trade in the AUC. Each time the security forces defeat a drug empire, he said, it prompts a scramble among smaller groups to take the incumbent's place. MAPP/OAS analysts said the current mafia violence reflects the struggle among new criminal groups, the FARC, and other criminal gangs to fill the vacuum left by the AUC demobilization.

15. (C) An exception to the apolitical nature of most new criminal groups is Organizacion Nueva Generacion (ONG) in the department of Narino . The ONG has 350-400 fighters and derives its key leaders, chain of command, and structure from the AUC's former Bloque de Libertadores del Sur (BLS)--many of whom did not demobilize. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) tells us ONG is enmeshed in the drug trade but also behaves like an organized military force, overtly patrolling areas under its control and engaging in combat against the FARC and ELN--reportedly in collusion with Colombian Army elements. ONG's "political leader" stresses the group's counter-insurgency role, and refers frequently to murdered AUC leader Carlos Castano. With GOC approval, the ICRC opened official communications with ONG--the only new criminal group with whom the ICRC maintains such contact.

DDR is Not the Culprit

16. (SBU) The ICG and OAS note the GOC's reintegration program has been flawed, but think tank Fundacion Seguridad y Democracia (FSD) believes the emergence of new groups is independent of the reinsertion process. In the six main regions of AUC demobilization, the Fundacion ranked GOC programs on initial attention, education, psychological counseling, and socioeconomic preparation for work. The FSD determined that the quality of reintegration programs offered had "no direct relation to criminality indicators." Instead, recent violence was due to emergent gangs, narcotraffickers, and guerrillas seeking to fill the gaps of power ceded by AUC disarmament.

GOC Response: Carabineros, Search Blocs, Proactive Outreach

17. (SBU) The GOC believes law enforcement--rather than the military--is the most effective tool to confront the new groups. Rural police or "carabinero" units were given responsibility for containing the emergence of new criminal groups, and the carabineros set up 108 substations--with more than 4000 personnel--in areas with large demobilized populations (ref D). The Colombian National Police also opened 15 posts in high-risk areas in 2006, and the Police plan to add 30 more in 2007. The goal is to have 400 rural substations by 2010. Carabineros coordinator Major Blanco said the substations are manned by 40-45 officers and are strategically located at critical areas (coca trafficking corridors) to work with local Army units. Carabineros have reached out to sectors vulnerable to extortion, like coffee growers and agricultural federations, signing security

agreements to preempt the growth of illegal private protection rackets.

18. (SBU) The GOC has also set up an interagency "search bloc" (coordinating police, Army, and investigative / judicial arms of the DAS, CTI, and Fiscalia) in Norte de Santander in January with strong results, and the model is being replicated nationally. Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos holds a monthly review of the interagency initiative, and special attention is focused on the groups' 'money trail.' Santos also meets regularly with MAPP/OAS head Sergio Caramagna to review progress in combating new groups. Since January, GOC security forces have captured 786 and killed 282 members of new criminal groups.

19. (SBU) The military counts the new groups as enemy targets, but defers to the Police and other law enforcement agencies in operations. Recent military tallies of enemy deaths in combat show the new groups ranked second after the FARC, but action is skewed towards the northeast with few casualties in the northwest and southwest. Most criminal group casualties in the Uraba region, for example, were due to internecine feuds. Police intelligence (DIPOL) unit chief Major Juan Carlos Buitrago said the groups are not a military problem, given their purely criminal nature, but agreed the military could be more active. The UNHCHR, ICG, OAS, and FSD cite reports of collusion, particularly in Narino, Meta, and Antioquia, as a factor limiting military action against new criminal groups.

Outlook

10. (SBU) The profits available from narcotrafficking will continue to fuel the emergence of new criminal groups, but important changes since the AUC era will likely limit their expansion. Leon Valencia of the Arco Iris Foundation said the AUC's power came from three elements -- military, political and economic (drugs and extortion) -- the first two

of which have been eliminated by demobilization and the para-political scandal. Security analyst Gustavo Duncan said the stronger state security presence--and revelations of para atrocities--have eroded the political and social legitimacy once enjoyed by the AUC in many regions. The continued expansion of state authority, especially in rural areas, and the growing societal rejection of such groups will make it difficult for them to recreate the AUC's armed, national network.

Nichols